

An Interview with T. A. Barron

Parts 1 & 2

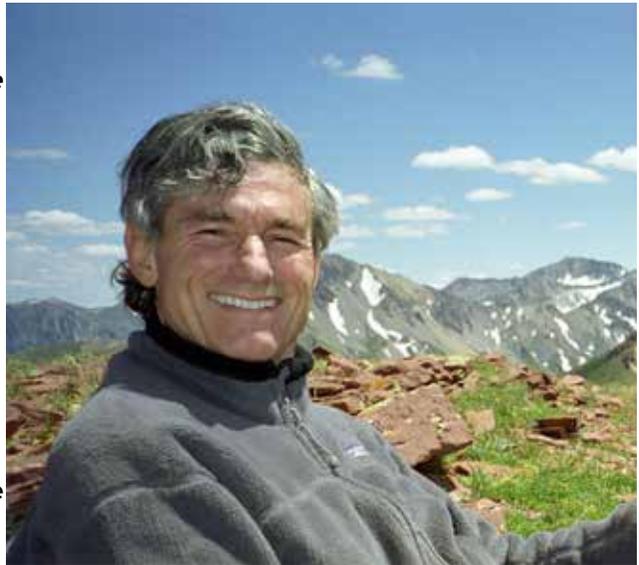
With Elizabeth Varadan

Elizabeth Varadan's Fourth Wish

April/May 2010

Part 1

*T. A. Barron is the author of the popular and five-book epic, **The Lost Years of Merlin**, which is soon to become a movie, based on the first book. His books have been translated into eight languages, and he is the recipient of the 2011 De Grummond USM Medallion for his lifelong contribution to the field of Children's and YA literature, as well as numerous other awards, including 2005 Nautilus Book Award-Grand Prize Winner, for **The Great Tree of Avalon** trilogy (another series that follows **The Lost Years of Merlin** and the **Merlin's Dragon** trilogy). He lives in Colorado with his wife and children. In addition to his YA novels, Barron has written picture books and nonfiction.*



EV: You have said that Merlin intrigued you because of a missing space in the legends about him. But there are missing spaces in stories of Arthur, Morgan La Fay, and Margawse, and the latter two also had magical powers. Why Merlin instead of one of the others?

TAB: Merlin is simply the most rich, amazing, wondrous character of all! He is, after all, the original wizard – the first mythic person who embodies the magic of nature. The more I have written about him (now almost twenty years), the more compelling he becomes.

Here are the reasons why:

Let me start by saying that I've been fascinated with Merlin ever since my first year as a student at Oxford, when I sat in the shade of an ancient English oak tree and read T.H. White's *Once and Future King*. But even though I eventually named that oak "Merlin's Tree", I had no idea that twenty years later I'd have the chance to weave another thread or two into the marvelous tapestry of myth about Merlin. Life is really more surprising than legend.

So why has Merlin persisted in our minds and hearts? Why have people been telling stories about him, adding to his legend, for over fifteen hundred years? Well, here's my theory. It's because Merlin stands for three basic ideals—ideals we need today, more than ever: universality, humility, and the sacredness of Nature.

First take universality. When you look at the original Celtic tales, Merlin's role was truly astounding. And unique. Despite all the chaos, warfare, plagues, and hardships of life in sixth century Britain, here came this wizard who actually succeeded in building bridges among people—Druids and Christians, nobles and peasants, archbishops and old gray wolves. And now, in our own time, when so many people are bent on tearing humanity apart, Merlin gives us hope that we can still perhaps come together.

Then there is humility. There is always a tension in Merlin's legends between the light and dark sides in humanity. And in Merlin himself. That is why, in the Celtic tales, he was given a saintly mother and a demonic father. And that is why, in my own tales of Merlin, he often grapples with his own dark side, his own flaws. All this makes him a wiser, more compassionate person—and a truly remarkable mentor.

And finally—Merlin's wondrous connection with Nature. To him, the language of the river or the tree isn't so far from his own; the echoing call of a wolf is full of wisdom. Humanity has always yearned to connect with the cosmos, to belong to the universe as wholly as light belongs to the stars. Merlin reminds us of that yearning, and inspires us to explore it.

Much like Merlin, the mythic world of Avalon kindles some of our deepest longings. For it is a place that combines mortal and immortal, transitory and eternal. A place where all creatures, whether they walk or fly or swim or crawl, live together in harmony. And also, a place of hope amidst human suffering. The sort of place where Merlin himself might live—and where, through the magic of story, we all can live, for a time.

EV: Are you the screenwriter for the movie, *The Lost Years of Merlin*? If so, how does writing script appeal to you? If not, are you comfortable with how it is being handled?

TAB: Originally, my agent asked me if I wanted to write the script. I said no – because writing a script is quite different from writing a novel, and I want a movie script that is the absolute best. And that's what we got from Simon Kinberg! He is a fabulous script writer and producer, whose recent credits include *Sherlock Holmes*, *XMen 3*, and *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*. In addition to being an accomplished script writer, Simon is as passionate about this project as I am – and equally respectful of Merlin. So I have had no difficulty at all in giving Simon the opportunity to bring this story to life on the big screen. It's been a true delight to work together with him.

EV: Is there a projected date yet for the movie? In other words, is the screenplay finished and have the stars been picked?

TAB: No date yet. We are still in development, with a terrific script. Now we are going out to directors, an exciting stage. So we are making progress ... but this is a bizarre process.

EV: You have spent nearly 20 years writing about Merlin and Merlin's dragon, Basil. Do you think any future projects will captivate your imagination to the extent that Merlin did?

TAB: After finishing my trilogy, *The Great Tree of Avalon*, (which, I'm pleased to say, made the *New York Times* best seller lists), I began the final trilogy to complete my saga of Merlin and his worlds. The result is the new *Merlin's Dragon* trilogy, which reveals what really happened between the final scene of *The Lost Years of Merlin* saga and the opening of *The Great Tree of Avalon* trilogy. Book I, titled *Merlin's Dragon*, follows the amazing adventures of a tiny little fellow named Basil... who has a future that is just as magical, heroic, and extraordinary as Merlin's. Though he has a very small body, he has a very big destiny! Book II, called *MERLIN'S DRAGON: Doomraga's Revenge*, continues his epic adventures. And Book III, titled *MERLIN'S DRAGON: Ultimate Magic*, will call on him to show the magic, power, and wisdom of the greatest dragon of all times—if he's going to save his beloved world of Avalon.

I am also delighted to announce an illustrated compendium volume, due in 2011, titled *The Book of Merlin*, which will reveal many secrets and back stories about more than 150 characters and places and magical objects found in all the Merlin books! Together, these two books will complete the 12-book saga of Merlin and his worlds. (And they cap off an 18-year creative process for me ... quite a journey.)

Tomorrow T. A. Barron discusses his writing process, his love of nature, advice for young writers, and the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, named after his mother, a woman who believed one person can make a difference.

Part 2

Today Barron discusses writing, young people and the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, inspired by his mother, Gloria Barron.

EV: Has your writing process changed in the course of writing such successful books? Do deadlines or expectations affect your work, or has your approach stayed much the same?

TAB: The writing process is still a mystery to me. All I know is that, to craft a story, I need three things: a character I care about; a wondrous, magical place; and a troubling question or idea. Without those three elements, I simply can't muster the energy to spend a day writing or revising a page—let alone several years creating a trilogy. (*The Great Tree of Avalon* books have taken me five years to complete.)

I've also learned that writing requires both sides of the brain. The rational, organized side of our brain enables us to design believable characters with journeys that are logically consistent and emotionally rewarding. The dreaming, poetic side enables us to make metaphors—as well as characters who come alive and surprise us with their secrets. In all this, details are crucial. My job as a writer boils down to one goal: making characters and places and plots feel true.

EV: Who does the artwork for your maps?

TAB: A variety of artists have done the artwork for my maps – including myself. Ian Schoenherr did the artwork for *The Lost Years of Merlin* map, Anthony Venti for *The Lost Crater* (map from *The Ancient One*), and I did the artwork for *The Great Tree of Avalon* maps.

EV: Your love of nature permeates all your books. Did you always feel this bond with nature so deeply? Or did it develop out of writing your books?

TAB: I have always had an affinity for nature. For starters, I grew up in places where Nature was always nearby, so I could explore a creek, climb a tree, pick an apple, or just cover myself with mud. The nearness of Nature shaped me profoundly. Not just in the challenging, adventurous ways you might expect—in deeper, spiritual ways, as well.

For example, I remember a snowy day when I was very young. My mother dressed me in one of those big puffy snowsuits that made me look like a huge, waddling balloon, and took me outside. There was so much snow, the drifts were even taller than me. Then my mother patted the top of an enormous snowdrift, and said, "Guess what? Believe it or not, there are flowers under there. You won't see them until springtime, but it's true." I was astounded. Amazed. Flowers? Under there? She was telling me about the patterns of the seasons, of course—but also about something more. Something like hope. Transformation. Renewal.

So why is wilderness important? Because unspoiled Nature is the last, best place on Earth for people to stand upright and tall, dwarfed by the sweep of the stars or the sweep of time, and yet still part of it all—connected to the changing seasons, the fox tracks, or the flight of geese. In Nature, we can feel both very small, and very large, at once—part of the universe, the pattern, the mystery.

And one more thing: In wilderness, we can still experience silence—a quality that's increasingly rare in this world. We can hear voices apart from our own, sounds not made by automobiles or chainsaws. We can even hear, sometimes, the whispers of creation—that remarkable process whose essence is life, and whose engine is silent.

EV: Have you ever returned to your first novel and considered revising it into a YA novel?

TAB: My editor has asked me to do that. Maybe someday I will. It has some strengths – mainly zany humor and imagination – but I can tell you it needs a lot of work!

EV: What do you think is the most productive steps a beginning writer can take to develop the craft? An MFA program? Workshops? Books on writing? Conferences?

TAB: I suggest three things: First, notice the world around you, with all your senses wide open. Second, remember that writing is a great way to explore the universe—not just in space and time, but also in the realm of ideas. Third, don't forget that writing is a craft, and the best way to improve is by practicing every chance you can. And then a fourth: Don't take rejection letters to heart. Everyone gets them, even established writers. They hurt, but they are just part of life. If you have something to say, and refuse to give up, you will find a way to say it and share it with others.

Finally, in case it's helpful, please check out the page (For New Writers) on my website:
<http://www.tabarron.com/>.

EV: Are there other writers in the family?

TAB: My children love to write. One of my favorite books ever is *The Mysterious Arrowhead*, written and illustrated by my 9-year-old daughter, Larkin, after a family rafting trip in Idaho.

EV: National Geographic Education Foundation and Girl Scouts of the USA, among other organizations, have partnered with you in providing the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes. It has also been highly commended by Jane Goodall. Can you tell us a little about the prize? What sparked the idea?

TAB: The Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes honors outstanding young leaders who have made a significant positive difference to people and our planet. Their leadership and courage make them true heroes—and inspirations to us all. Each year, the Barron Prize honors twenty-five winners nationwide. Half of the winners have focused on helping their communities and fellow beings; half have focused on protecting the health and sustainability of the environment. The goal of the Barron Prize is to celebrate such heroic young people—and to inspire others to do their part. Like the woman for whom the prize was named—my mother, Gloria Barron—these young people demonstrate the power of one person to make a difference to the world.

EV: Thank you for sharing such helpful suggestions for readers and budding writers. I look forward (as I'm sure readers do) to seeing the movie, *The Lost Years of Merlin!*